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The Vanity, Misery, and Infamy, of Knowledge without suitable Practice;

REPRESENTED IN A

SERMON

PREACHED AT

HACKNEY,

NOVEMBER the 4th, 1770.

By RICHARD PRICE, D.D. F.R.S.

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ADVERTISEMENT.

THE following SERMON is printed just as it was composed without any thoughts of publication, in compliance with the desire of a worthy member of the congregation to which it was preached.

JOHN xiii. 17.

If ye know theſe things, happy are ye if ye do them.

THESE words are a part of the ſpeech which our Lord addreſſed to his apoſtles after waſhing their feet. It was uſual among the eaſtern nations to convey inſtruction by actions. This method of teaching had in it many conſiderable advantages. A precept delivered in dry words was not ſo likely to be remembered, nor could it make ſo ſtrong an impreſſion, as when exhibited to the ſenſes, and enforced by a ſtriking action. It was for this reaſon, probably, that our Lord adopted this method of inſtruction. It was

indeed particularly ſuited to his purpoſe. The perſons He had to teach were common perſons, unacquainted with literature. A particular action performed before ſuch perſons, in order to explain and inculcate an important truth, would do them more good than any *verbal* admonitions. For inſtance. On this occaſion; how cold would any exhortation in *words*, to humility and condeſcenſion, have been, compared with our Lord's giving an example of theſe virtues, by waſhing the feet of his apoſtles in the manner He did?——The Jews generally walked in ſandals, with their feet naked, and without ſtockings. Waſhing the feet, therefore, was a work which they had frequent occaſion to do. It was reckoned one of the meaneſt offices that one perſon could do for another, and never was performed by a ſuperior for an inferior. That one therefore of ſuch ſuperiority and dignity as our Lord, ſhould now inſiſt upon performing it for his diſciples, muſt have ap-

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peared to them very wonderful. Accordingly we read, that when He came to do it for *Peter*, he proteſted againſt it, and declared that he would never ſubmit to it. Finding, however, his Maſter reſolute, and that the conſequence of a refuſal would be his diſpleaſure, he changed his mind, and offered not his *feet* only, but his hands and his head, to be waſhed if He thought proper.———After finiſhing this office, we are told He returned to his place, and delivered that explanation of what He had done which begins in the 12th verſe of this chapter. *So, after he had waſhed their feet, and had taken his garments and was ſet down again, he ſaid to them, Know ye what I have done to you? Ye call me Maſter and Lord, and ye ſay well, for ſo I am. If I, then, your Lord and Maſter, have waſhed your feet, ye ought alſo to waſh one another's feet; for I have given you an example, that ye ſhould do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I ſay unto you, the ſervant*

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is not greater than his Lord, neither is he that is ſent greater than he that ſent him. If ye know theſe things, happy are ye if ye do them.——Theſe are admirable words. *Such* an action, followed by *ſuch* an admonition, could not but make impreſſions on the minds of the apoſtles never to be eraſed.

My preſent deſign is only to make ſome obſervations on the words, *if ye know theſe things, happy are ye if ye do them.* They very naturally lead our thoughts to the following reflections:--" That our ob-" ligations cannot extend further than our " knowledge:"—" That knowledge and " practice are by no means neceſſarily " connected:"--" That *practice* is of much " greater conſequence than *knowledge*, and " gives it all its value and uſefulneſs:" " That, when ſeparated from practice, " knowledge becomes indeed an unhappi-" neſs; and that, on the contrary, when

"joined to practice, it becomes the high-
"eſt bleſſing and honour."

Theſe are ſome of the truths on which I ſhall inſiſt in this diſcourſe.

I. We may take occaſion from the words of my text to conſider, that our obligations cannot extend beyond our knowledge. When our Lord ſaid, *if* ye know, or *ſince* ye know theſe things, happy are ye if ye do them, it is implied that our obligation to *do* depends on our *knowing*. It is one of the greateſt abſurdities to imagine, that we can be bound to any thing about which we are in a ſtate of ignorance. Were this true, we ſhould be bound to impoſſibilities; for no one can practiſe a duty which is not made known to him. The degree of light enjoyed muſt therefore be the meaſure of moral obligation to every human being.

Our notions of the Divine juſtice and equity will not ſuffer us to doubt whether

this is true. From *Pagans* leſs is required than from *Chriſtians*; and as much leſs as they know leſs of their Maſter's will. To different men God has communicated different advantages. Some are obliged to grope by the light of the moon and ſtars, and others are bleſſed with the light of the ſun. It is much more deſirable to walk by day-light than by moon-light. All however have light enough, if they rightly improve it, to enable them to find the way to God's favour. If there is any one who has no light given him, he is not a moral agent, and nothing can be expected from him. But this cannot be ſuppoſed of any reaſonable creature. There is no perſon ſo ignorant as not to have ſome knowledge of moral good and evil; and his acceptance and happineſs depend on his acting up to this knowledge, whatever it is; and not on his acting up to any more extenſive knowledge which others in more advantageous circumſtances have.

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What I have now ſaid has a tendency to relieve our thoughts in conſidering ſome of the difficulties in Divine Providence. It repreſents to us the ways of the Deity as entirely juſt and equal; for if no more is required than is ſuitable to the knowledge and powers of beings, none can have any reaſon for complaint.——You ſhould, however, remember here one caution of importance.——The ignorance that excuſes from obligation is *unaffected* and *neceſſary* ignorance. *Voluntary* ignorance is a crime, and will, without doubt, be adequately puniſhed. There is, I doubt, a great deal of this ſort of criminal ignorance among Chriſtians, and particularly among perſons in the lower ſtations of life. It is a common plea with the poor that they are ignorant, and that therefore they cannot be obliged to do as much as others. This is very true, but not at all to the purpoſe for which they alledge it. They make themſelves eaſy with it in their irreligion and vices; but nothing can be more perverſe.

verſe. It does not follow that, becauſe they are not bound to do as much as others, they are bound to do nothing. Though their obligations do not extend ſo far as thoſe of perſons who know more, yet they extend as far as they know, or to every thing about which they cannot plead unavoidable ignorance. Thus; there is no one ſo low and illiterate as not to know, that he ought to avoid diſhoneſty, drunkenneſs, and ſwearing, to love and obey Jeſus Chriſt, and to fear God and worſhip Him in private and public. As far as any one then tranſgreſſes in theſe inſtances he tranſgreſſes *knowingly*; and it will prove a baſe turn of mind to plead in his own defence his ignorance, that excuſe holding only with reſpect to obligations of which he knows nothing.

But what I meant principally to obſerve here is, that the ignorance pleaded by the perſons I am ſpeaking of is a voluntary and affected ignorance. It is what they

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choſe to retain becauſe they think it will furniſh them with an excuſe hereafter; and they will not uſe the means of inſtruction in order to be better informed, leſt they ſhould be deprived of this excuſe. I have reaſon to believe that there is a great deal of this wickedneſs among the lower part of mankind. Thoſe who fall into ſuch a way of thinking will find themſelves miſerably miſtaken. They act as fooliſhly as a man who makes himſelf drunk, in order to be able to commit a murder innocently. They fly from the light leſt their deeds ſhould be reproved, and for this reaſon they deſerve a ſevere condemnation. The only innocent ignorance is that which remains with us, after we have uſed the beſt means in our power to inform our judgments.

But I muſt haſten to the next point to which I have propoſed ſpeaking.——My text, I have obſerved, leads us further to conſider, "that *knowledge* and *practice* are by

by no means neceſſarily connected." Conſtant experience puts this out of doubt. It is, indeed, melancholy to think what little connexion there is between theſe. The moſt knowing ought to be the moſt virtuous; but, inſtead of this, they are very often the moſt vicious. They employ their knowledge, not to mend their hearts or to reſtrain their paſſions, but to gain applauſe or to over-reach and deceive. They make uſe of it for oſtentation or miſchief, and not for directing them in a courſe of upright and uſeful conduct. We can never conclude what a man's character is from the parts he poſſeſſes, or the opinions he holds. Nothing is more common than for men to *believe* one thing, and to *practiſe* the contrary. The beſt *ſentiments* may have poſſeſſion of their *heads*, while the vileſt *diſpoſitions* govern their *actions*. It goes but a little way towards reclaiming men from ſin, to convince them of its odiouſneſs and danger and miſery. We ſee continu-

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ally, that thoſe who receive the righteſt principles, who poſſeſs the ſtricteſt faith, and make the faireſt profeſſion, are very wicked and worthleſs. They acknowledge the authority of Chriſt without ſubmitting to it. They profeſs an admiration of his precepts without obeying them, and zeal for his name without departing from iniquity. They believe that in a ſhort time they ſhall be judged according to their works, and yet they take no care of their works. They know that without holineſs they muſt loſe eternal happineſs, and ſink into miſery and ruin, and yet they diſcover no ſolicitude about practiſing holineſs. In ſhort, it is one of the moſt undeniable truths, that we may have all the faith and knowledge in the world in our *underſtandings*, without one ſpark of genuine goodneſs in our *characters*. The devils, St. James tells us, *believe*. They *know* more than any human being, and yet they remain devils.

The reaſon of this common ſeparation between knowledge and practice is the influence of particular affections and paſſions within us, leading us contrary to our knowledge. Our judgments direct us one way; our paſſions draw us another. Reaſon dictates piety and righteouſneſs: brutal appetites and the temptations of the world incline us to irreligion and wickedneſs. The latter get the better, and thus we are ſeduced and corrupted; our knowledge becomes of no avail, and our lives are rendered a ſcene of inconſiſtency between our principles and our conduct.

Further. My text, I have obſerved, leads us to conſider "that practice is of "much greater conſequence than know-"ledge, and gives it its value."——— *If ye know theſe things, happy are ye if ye do them.* That is, "*knowing* what I have "told you is not of much conſequence: "it is *doing* it that is of conſequence, "and that alone can make you happy."

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——The knowledge of our duty is given us on purpoſe that we may do it. Practice is all, and it ſignifies little what we know if this is wanting. No intellectual talents or accompliſhments are of any ſervice to thoſe who poſſeſs them, except they render them better than other men. It is the ſubſerviency of wit and learning to virtue that makes them indeed ornaments and bleſſings. Knowledge that is not attended with correſpondent practice is defeated of its end. It becomes maimed and vain and unprofitable. The words of St. Paul may be here adopted with great propriety. Though we have all faith ſo as to remove mountains, and all knowledge ſo as to underſtand the deepeſt myſteries, yet if we have not right practice, we are no better than ſounding braſs or a tinkling cymbal. We may ſhine and make a great noiſe, but we ſhall be deſtitute of all true worth. *One* good diſpoſition in the ſoul is infinitely preferable to the fineſt parts, or the moſt brilliant wit.

One virtue in the life is more valuable than a million of truths floating in the head, or any arts and ſciences with which the underſtanding can be ſtocked.

I wiſh this was properly conſidered by all the world. We are too apt to be dazzled with the luſtre of great talents, and to ſet an undue value on wit and genius. But the endowments of the *head* deſerve no admiration compared with the endowments of the *heart*. Virtue is the one thing that is truly and invariably great and admirable, and to this chiefly all other qualities owe their excellence.——There is indeed an excellence in knowledge, but it is founded principally on its connexion with practice. There is a *greatneſs* in it; but, when ſeparated from a virtuous character, it is nothing but the greatneſs of a *demon*. It is important and valuable; but the importance of it conſiſts in its furniſhing us with greater means and powers of uſefulneſs.——Some degree of knowledge

ledge is abſolutely neceſſary to the practice of virtue; and the more any being has of it, the more he is capable of the improvement and happineſs connected with virtue. For this reaſon, it may be conſidered as the *foundation* of all the dignity of a reaſonable creature; and therefore it muſt be our duty to endeavour to acquire as much of it as we can. But ſtill we ſhould remember, that it is the *uſe* we make of it, or the ſuperſtructure we raiſe upon it, that muſt render it an advantage and bleſſing. It will render us more *honourable* or more *deformed* juſt as we apply it: and the *loweſt* degree of it, when attended *with* ſuitable practice, will turn to infinitely more account than the *higheſt* degree of it *without* ſuitable practice. It is better unſpeakably to be even the ſillieſt creature upon earth, and at the ſame time virtuouſly diſpoſed, than to be the fineſt *wit* or the *firſt ſcholar* in the world, and at the ſame time proud,

ill-natured or envious.———But there is much more than this to be ſaid here.

Knowledge, when ſeparated from right practice, is not only thus *unprofitable*, but *hurtful* and *pernicious*. It only aggravates guilt, and makes us more vile and deteſtable. Inſtead of contributing to our happineſs, it becomes a *nuiſance* and a *curſe*, and will ſink us deeper into ruin.——— If a man of an improved underſtanding is mean or falſe or covetous, he is ſo much the more baſe and hateful. Thoſe who are above *vulgar errors and prejudices* ought alſo to be above *vulgar paſſions and vices*; and if they are not, they are more contemptible than the moſt ignorant *mechanics* or *beggars*. There is always an inconſiſtency in moral evil when joined to ſuperior knowledge, which increaſes its odiouſneſs and demerit. The more a perſon knows, the more he muſt ſee of the importance of righteouſneſs; and,

and, therefore, the more inexcuſable he muſt be if he deviates from it. Such a perſon muſt be more depraved, and he muſt expoſe himſelf to a more ſevere puniſhment, in proportion as he ſins more againſt light and conviction. *He that knoweth his maſter's will* (our Saviour tells us) *and doeth it not, ſhall be beaten with many ſtripes.* He will ſuffer particular effects of God's diſpleaſure, and be condemned to the deepeſt infamy and miſery.——In ſhort, every man will ſoon find that the *want of reaſon* is much better than *reaſon abuſed*; and that to live and die the *pooreſt ideot*, is more deſirable than to poſſeſs knowledge, without applying it to the practice of righteouſneſs. But Oh! how happy are thoſe who both *know* and *do* their duty? How great and honourable are thoſe, who are as much diſtinguiſhed by the excellence of their tempers and the integrity of their lives, as by the brightneſs of their parts and the

ſuperiority of their underſtandings?——— I will beg leave here to dwell a little on the peculiar happineſs of ſuch perſons, becauſe it is the point to which the words of my text particularly lead our thoughts.

If ye know theſe things, happy are ye if ye do them. It is impoſſible properly to deſcribe this happineſs. In order to have ſome idea of it, let us conſider diſtinctly,

1ſt. What an honour and dignity knowledge, when attended with virtuous practice, beſtows on a character. I have hinted this already, but it is proper that it ſhould be here repeated.———As there is nothing more monſtrous than a bad heart joined to a head adorned with knowledge; ſo there is nothing more excellent than the contrary. A *life* regulated by piety and virtue, united to an *underſtanding* improved by ſcience; ſuperior talents of judgment and learning, directed

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by candor, benevolence and goodneſs; this includes all that is moſt noble and reſpectable in a character.

2dly. Knowledge united to practice capacitates particularly for uſefulneſs in the world. There is no ſuch bleſſing to mankind, there is no ſuch ornament to religion, as the man who employs his knowledge to do good, and lives agreeably to the light and dictates of a well-informed judgment.

Further, ſuch a perſon has the greateſt ſatisfaction within himſelf. He has in his own mind an inexhauſtible fund of joy and pleaſure. He is free from thoſe reproaches of conſcience, by which thoſe who *know* what is right without *doing* it, muſt be tormented. A perſon whoſe actions are at variance with his judgment muſt be the ſeat of conſtant tumult and vexation. The juſter his ſentiments are and the more exten-

ſive his knowledge, ſo much the more muſt he be the object of his own abhorrence. But a perſon who has an enlightened mind, and at the ſame time acts uprightly, and is conſcious of obeying the dictates of his reaſon, is the more happy in proportion as he ſees more of the light of truth, and is better inſtructed in his duty.

Again, Thoſe who both know and do Chriſt's precepts are approved and loved by him. He ſees them with pleaſure. He conſiders them as his true diſciples, and will communicate to them the richeſt ſupplies of his grace.———But what deſerves chiefly to be mentioned is, that ſuch perſons ſhall be hereafter rewarded, by Chriſt, with complete and unchangeable bliſs in his kingdom. They are now his faithful followers, and he will ſoon take them to live with him for ever, and raiſe them to the higheſt perfection and dignity of rational beings.———When,

therefore, Chriſt ſaid in my text, *If ye know theſe things, happy are ye if ye do them*, we may conſider him as ſaying, "If you add *practice* to *knowledge*, and "not only *underſtand* my inſtructions but "*do* them, you will be truly valuable "and worthy. You will be bleſſings in "my church. You will be amiable in my "ſight. God will be your friend, and "your relation to me will iſſue in your "eternal happineſs."

Upon the whole. We ſee what ſtrong motives we have to endeavour to accompany our knowledge of our duty with the practice of it. You have heard that knowledge without practice is much worſe than vain and inſignificant. It is a bane and a curſe. It renders thoſe who poſſeſs it more deſpicable and vile. It *increaſes* guilt, and will inflame our future reckoning, and ſink into a ſeverer puniſhment.

Theſe arguments ought to teach us to apply our labour above all things to practice. We ought indeed to endeavour to increaſe our knowledge. This, if properly improved, is very deſirable and important. But I am ſhewing you a more excellent way.

Deſire knowledge; but deſire it in order to practice. Deſire knowledge; but turn your main zeal towards religious goodneſs. 'Tis this alone can render you lovely and reſpectable. It is this alone that can ſave you from future condemnation, and bring you to everlaſting happineſs.——— The practice of righteouſneſs is the proper buſineſs of life. It was for this we were ſtationed in the preſent world, and not ſo much for any of the purpoſes of ſpeculation and literary improvement. The only ſcience worth purſuing with anxiety is that which leads to the amendment of the heart, and helps us to eſtabliſh our ſouls in purity and tranquility.

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If God gives us knowledge enough for this, we need not be very ſorry for our ignorance in other reſpects. It is without doubt extremely deſirable to be poſſeſſed of extenſive knowledge; nor can any perſon of liberal ſentiments avoid wiſhing, he was better ſatisfied than he is on many points of ſpeculation. A thirſt after knowledge is a noble and excellent principle; and we cannot cheriſh it too much, if we take care to keep it in a proper ſubordination to a thirſt after *moral* improvement.——We ſhould however always remember, that in the preſent world we cannot hope to have this principle gratified. Our buſineſs now (as I have juſt obſerved) is to endeavour to form our characters to true righteouſneſs; and if we do this, our deſire of knowledge ſhall be gratified in another ſtate. He that applies himſelf now to religious goodneſs, ſhall have all the knowledge he wiſhes for in another ſtate. But he that neglects this now, and whoſe knowledge leaves him a ſlave to

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brutal paſſions, is more wretched than can be imagined. He muſt fall a ſacrifice to divine juſtice, and his knowledge end in ſhame and ruin.

From what I have juſt ſaid it appears, that our very thirſt after knowledge leads us ſtrongly to turn our attention towards right practice, rather than any thing elſe. It appears that it is thus only we can attain to true knowledge. It is but little we are capable of knowing in this life. We are at preſent neceſſarily in a ſtate of great ignorance. We are obliged to content ourſelves, in numberleſs inſtances, with *conjecture* inſtead of *knowledge*, and to ſit down in doubt and drakneſs with reſpect to ſubjects, which we cannot help longing to be better acquainted with.——Would you acquire real knowledge? Would you have all your preſent doubts reſolved? Would you become acquainted with the conſtitution of nature, the wiſdom of providence and the wonders of the creation?

tion? Would you exchange this ſtate of darkneſs and ignorance for the regions of light and glory?——Then, apply yourſelves to the practice of righteouſneſs.—— Be *virtuous* now, and you ſhall be *knowing* hereafter.

I have now ſtated to you the importance of connecting practice with our knowledge. Inſtead of enlarging further on this ſubject, I ſhall beg leave to conclude this diſcourſe, with addreſſing myſelf to you particularly, on the importance of adding to our knowledge of CHRISTIANITY the practice of it.—— I cannot exhort you to any thing of more importance. It has appeared, that if God gives us knowledge enough to enable us to practice righteouſneſs, we need not be very anxious about any thing further. This has been given us abundantly by Jeſus Chriſt. What we ought therefore moſt to ſeek is an acquaintance with the goſpel of Chriſt. This is the knowledge we

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ought moſt to deſire and eſteem. By the goſpel we are made acquainted with the one true God, and Jeſus the Meſſiah whom he ſent into the world to ſave us. Here we have revealed to us ſeveral facts in providence of inconceivable importance; the method of our acceptance with God, and the way to ETERNAL LIFE. But tho' our knowledge of Chriſtianity were ever ſo exact and extenſive, it will be worſe than vain, if our actions are not conformable to it. The inſtruction afforded us by the goſpel is in order to practice. It teaches us what we ought to be and do, and ſets before us the ſtrongeſt reaſons to induce us to diſcharge our duty. But if, notwithſtanding this, we tranſgreſs our duty and continue unrighteous and ſinful, we become the moſt inexcuſable of all men. Knowing the precepts of Chriſt without obeying them, will make our condition much worſe, than if we had never heard of them. Chriſtianity to thoſe who don't practiſe it muſt be a *curſe*, and not a *bleſſing*. At

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the ſame time that it ſurrounds them with light, it expoſes their wickedneſs. At the ſame time that it improves their knowledge, it ſinks them into deeper miſery.—If you don't act ſuitably to Chriſtianity you are hypocrites in the church of Chriſt; and in the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for *Sodom* and *Gomorrah* than for you. Learn then to obey the laws, and to imbibe the ſpirit of your holy religion.——You profeſs zeal for Chriſt; but this is a mockery of him and an inſult upon him, if you don't do what he commands you. It is not ſo much your *faith*, but your *works* that he regards. Right practice is what is of moſt value in his eſtimation; and without this all the noiſe you can make about doctrines is odious in his ſight.——He came down from heaven to teach you righteouſneſs, and to exhibit it to you in his own example. If you don't practiſe it, you defeat his end in coming down among men, and as much as in you lies render his humiliation and labour of no

effect.—Such conſiderations muſt impreſs every ingenuous mind. May they have a proper effect on the minds of all preſent. ——Let us place our chief ambition in acting up to the excellent principles of Chriſtianity, and in bringing our tempers and characters to a conformity to the inſtructions and admonitions of our Lord and Saviour.——There is no moral obligation, or any motive neceſſary to lead us to goodneſs and to ſupport us in the practice of it, with which we are not made acquainted by the goſpel of Chriſt.

You know that you ought to love God with all your hearts, and to love your neighbour as yourſelves; that you ought to do to others as you would have others do to you; that you ought to practiſe patience and reſignation; to love even your enemies, to return good for evil, to cultivate meekneſs and purity, to be ready to ſubmit to the loweſt offices for the good of others, to imitate children in ſimplicity

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and humility, and to watch and pray, in order to be ready for that day in which God will call you to account for your actions. You are ſenſible that theſe are the injunctions of Jeſus Chriſt. You all of you *know* theſe things. Happy will you be if you *do* them. In the day of judgment Chriſt will place you at his right hand. He will confeſs your name before the Father and his angels. He will take you with him to his kingdom, and fix you in the poſſeſſion of that happineſs, which no tongue can now deſcribe, or heart conceive.

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